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ABSTRACT

A case study examines a nontraditional African-American student enrolled in English 90 at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. The first person in her family to attend college, she is attractive, personal, outspoken and speaks not only the dialect of her family, which shows the influence of French, but also standard English. When asked how her English 90 was helping her, she replied, "It helps my speech." During various conversations, she constantly returned to the importance of her speech and its link, not only with her writing, but also with her identity. She complained, "Most black people today are stereotyped as dummies because of the way they talk." This student further told of how, since the time she was a young girl, she has consciously molded her speech--and later her appearance too--to suit the tastes of the dominant culture. Research shows that she probably chose to change her speech because she is a female. William Labov and Peter Trudgill's "Study of Non Standard English" states that "women...are more proven to stigmatize nonstandard usage." Other studies suggest women are more status conscious because their position in society is less secure. Instructors of basic writing should, as much as possible, value the language variety in which their students' identities are most clearly realized. They should help them analyze their own attitudes toward writing and language. (TB)

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Prioritizing Orality in Constructs of Identity

This paper is a case study of a basic writing student, Tamla*, whom I first met over a year ago when I interviewed her to discuss her progress in English 90, the developmental English course at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. She was then a first time student enrolled in three developmental courses: English, Math, and Academic Skills; she had tested out of reading. Her goal was to complete a four year degree in Medical Records Administration.

Tamla is a very attractive, personable, outspoken, confident, young African-American woman with a strong self-image. In many ways, she is representative of non-traditional students enrolling in basic writing courses today. Tamla is the first person in her family to attend college. She left school when she was sixteen, went to work in a local supermarket and completed her GED during that time. Shortly thereafter, she attended beauty school, graduated from there in 1989, and then went to work as a waitress in a country club. When I met her, she was 21, living alone with her two and a half year old son, working as a student aid, and going to school full-time.

Tamla was placed in the developmental English class because

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she scored less than sixteen on the English section of the ACT and failed to test out of the departmental writing requirement. She felt she belonged in the developmental course and she enjoyed her class. At the time, she was only just passing the course, scoring As and Bs in her journals but only Cs and Ds in her essays; she admitted having special difficulty with in-class writing assignments. She needed to pass an essay exit exam with a grade of C or better to enter into college-level English.

As I continued the interview I found it increasingly difficult to get Tamla to discuss her writing. When I asked her how English 90 was helping her, she replied, "It helps my speech." Immediately she made the connection between orality and literacy, "When you talk like that, you write like that." "Writing and speaking work together. Organization helps people understand what you are saying or writing." "I want to make sense when I speak; I want to be more coherent." During our conversation, she constantly returned to the importance of her speech and its link, not only with her writing, but also with her identity--who she perceives herself to be, her identity as constructed by her listeners, and how she defines her social identity. She complained: "People think I'm Jamaican." "I don't want to be stereotyped as a dummy because I'm a woman." "Most black people to-day are stereo-typed as a dummy because of the way they talk. You can tell the level of education by the way they speak."

As you will hear (I hope) Tamla has a particularly attractive tone and intonation to her voice. She speaks

carefully, but unselfconsciously; her speech did not change when the interview ended and we chatted informally over lunch, so I am assuming that the voice and language she used during the interview are very close to her natural speaking voice. Obviously speech and the ability to speak Standard English is most important to Tamla because that ability makes a statement to the world about her personal and social identity. In order to be listened to and valued, she is implying, one must be educated and, to be educated, means to speak standard, (white) English. As you will hear, (on the tape recording), she seems completely unresentful of the fact that she has been in the process of changing her speech since she was a young child--she calls it "a game." Presumably, as we have already heard from her comments, this change in her speech will help her achieve the goals in her life: to get her degree, to have a well-paying job, to send her children to college; in other words assimilation into middle-class (white) America.

Well when I was in school like I said most of my class mates were white and if you come from a home where your grandmother speaks French and you learn English you kinda talk that way like instance "Where you cher?" and "What you goin do todaay?" It kinda slurs. I would listen and I would laugh because . . . so I would go to class and some of my white friends and some of my black friends from the south side of town who would have perfect English because they don't have any French in the house-hold they would speak proper like "Tamla, what are you doing today?" Things like that so I'd listen to them then I'd go to sleep-over

at their houses and they'd come to mine and I'd just listen to them and when they called me on the phone that's when I started [to change her speech]. I would try to speak just like them. And I did that for so long and then when I got maybe eleven I grew out of it. The language just took its own course. Cause when I was younger I did it as a joke, I mean, but I did it like a game, yeah like a game.

Tamla may not be experiencing any conflict in her constructs of identity, and, on reflection, I cannot help making the connection between her use of language and her training in beauty school--as it seems to me that she is using language in the same, skilful way that she uses cosmetics--to enhance her appearance as she presents herself to the world. Although she has slightly altered her outward appearance, the essential Tamla remains with a strong sense of identity. Despite Tamla's essential integrity, this case study does raise questions concerning other basic writing students who may not have the same strong sense of identity as Tamla has, and who may feel fragmented when forced to create a new voice. Furthermore, the case study also questions why Tamla felt obliged to change her language even though she insists it was only "a game."

Research shows that Tamla most probably chose to change her speech because she is female, and, also, because she was aware at an early age that there were many different worlds in which she could situate herself. Her mother was a realtor; she attended an elementary school in a white, middle-class neighborhood; but her grandmother spoke a different language--Louisiana Creole French--

and her aunt was illiterate. Regarding this topic, most often cited is the research of William Labov and Peter Trudgill. Labov in his [The] *Study of Non Standard English* (1969) states that "women . . . are more proven to stigmatize nonstandard usage" and that the "hypercorrect pattern of the second highest status group is accentuated in women" (33). Keith Gilyard whose work I shall be referring to later quotes Labov's *Study of Language in the Inner Cities* (1981) as showing that "women generally employ more prestige language than men and tend to exhibit much greater fluctuation in the modes they employ" (31).

Trudgill also discovered that "women use forms associated with the prestige standard more frequently than men" (91b). He speculates that the reason for this is because women are more status-conscious than men and this in turn is because "the social position of women in our society is less secure than that of men" and that because women are often not rated by their occupations or earnings "they have instead to be rated on how they appear. Since they are not rated by their occupations . . . other signals of status, including speech, are correspondingly more important" (92).

Certainly, Tamla does say, "It amazed me that people talked differently than I. Because I had never heard anybody speak any different. Everybody was always talkin in that French," but she quickly learned to speak the language of the most dominant group. That that language happened to be the language of power and prestige is, perhaps, not quite so important as the fact that it was the language of the majority of her peers and the group with

which she wanted to identify. Cheris Kramarae in her book *Women and Men Speaking* tells us what you and I know instinctively as practitioners, "that people continually adjust speech style to reduce or accentuate the linguistic differences between speakers" (100). But that Tamla changed her speech so dramatically is largely, I think, a consequence primarily of her gender, : as the psychologist Carol Gilligan points out "since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender is threatened by separation" (8). Tamla wanted to identify with the majority of her peers in her middle-class elementary school rather than with her family at home.

As far as her own personal identity is concerned, Tamla prioritizes gender over ethnicity and this, too, I believe influences her choice of language. When I asked her how she would identify herself she said, "First and foremost as a woman, then a mother, then a student, then--(cause color doesn't make you who you are). Because,--I am black--but I mean, if you look at me you can see that there's a whole lot of different cultures inside me from on down the line." But Tamla also expresses the dilemma experienced by all women in the construction of their identity through language: "I want to speak proper English because I want people to say this girl has a head on her shoulders and that I benefitted from my education." Robin Lakoff, who has done much research on women's language and the submergence of their identity in language, could have been speaking of Tamla when she writes: "she finds that she is

treated--purely because of the way she speaks and, therefore, supposedly thinks--as someone not to be taken seriously" and Tamla realizes that she will not be taken seriously if she does not speak "proper English." Notice also how Tamla uses "woman" when she describes herself and "girl" when she describes herself from a listener's point of view, perceiving her as young, brainless, uneducated and black.

Lakoff discusses also the paradox that many women experience when they change their language and adopt a more masculine style so that the world will treat them seriously, with respect and not as "air-heads," "bow-heads," "ding-bats." She cites Gregory Bateson (*Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, Ballantine, 1972) who terms this psychological situation a "double-bind," a situation where you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. This, of course, is akin to the situation faced by many basic writing students, male or female, who unlike Tamla assume a different voice only under duress and, in so doing, face rejection by their peers. Bateson suggests that when such a double-bind situation occurs in childhood it may lead to schizophrenia. Gilyard also raises the question of what he calls the "psychic bill" paid by young African-Americans when they successfully adopt Standard English in school.

If we accept that each act of utterance is "an ACT OF IDENTITY" and if we agree with Peter Trudgill when he writes "to suggest to a child that his language, and that of those with whom he identifies, is inferior in some way. is to imply that *he* is inferior" (Gilyard 72) then we must reexamine our notions of

bidialectalism in the classroom. Gilyard states that "Bidialectalists postulate that BE is equal to SE but not quite equal enough"(74). Certainly, I agree with Gilyard, but surely the minority student with a strong command of SE will be less discriminated against than the minority student without such a facility, certainly she must have that facility in code-switching to succeed in college. Is this presenting the student with a false dilemma or avoiding the issue of pluralism? I think not; as Robin Lakoff states "linguistic and social change go hand in hand: one cannot purely by changing language use, change social status" (41) and she continues "the parallel to the black struggle should indicate that social change must precede lexical change" (42) "Social change creates language change, not the reverse" (47).

We may not directly be able to create social change, but what changes can we effect in our classroom to benefit students like Tamla and draw on their privileging of the spoken language? We should, of course, as much as possible value the language variety in which their identity is most clearly realized. Terry Dean in a 1989 *CCC* article has many teaching strategies for multicultural classes including "assignments that require students to analyze their attitudes toward writing" and we can add language. He writes that 85% of his students "believe they do not have to give up cultural and home values to attend university" (29). Fiore and Elsasser have also written on the liberatory curriculum they devised while teaching women in the College of the Bahamas. For a long time many of us have been

aware of the discrimination of women and girls in the classroom; Joyce Penfield's book *Women and Language in Transition* has numerous suggestions for creating a climate in which women can fully participate. Knowing how important orality is to students like Tamla, we should perhaps always include class and small group discussion before each writing assignment. A frequent complaint of graduate assistants is that basic writing students don't appreciate literature. We should remind them of Shirley Brice Heath's findings that in the town of Trackton communities read chiefly for information rather than pleasure. In view of this, perhaps we should begin by assigning informative rather than literary reading in our basic writing classes. Above all we must provide choices. We should provide basic writing students with the ability, the freedom, the right, and the responsibility to develop their own individual voices expressing their own identities--strong and fully integrated.

*I was introduced to Tamla by Ms. Traci Smrcka, a graduate teaching assistant at The University of Southwestern University.